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Press Release

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Wereth 11 remembered in ceremony

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WERETH, Belgium – During the early stages of World War II's Battle of the Bulge, 11 black U.S. Soldiers assigned to the 333rd Field Artillery Battalion were tortured and executed by German SS officers. Though they have been gone for many years, their spirits live on in this tiny village located in eastern Belgium.

Local townspeople, along with Soldiers and family members based in Belgium and Germany, participated in a wreath-laying ceremony April 28, commemorating men known as the Wereth 11. The ceremony was preceded with a procession led by a color guard from the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Germany.

“We are aware of the tragedy...for what happened on Dec. 17th, 1944, should never be forgotten,” said Brig. Gen. Dennis L. Via, commander of 5th Signal Command, Mannheim, Germany, who served as the event's keynote speaker. “However, we are not here today to focus on the crime and the pain. We are here today to focus on the heroic lives of these 11 Americans.”

But to help focus on their lives, some historical background is necessary. The following is a combination of several accounts of what occurred here 62 years ago.

After being reactivated in the regular Army as a 155mm howitzer battalion just a year before their deployment, the 333rd FA Soldiers spent their first six months in combat supporting the 2nd Infantry Division and VII Corps, while holding the front line against German troops. When the Battle of the Bulge began, the unit was located near St. Vith, Belgium.

During the second day of the fight – the Germans last major counter-offensive of World War II – 11 members of the Headquarters and Service Battery became separated from their unit while evading German armor and infantry units.

While searching for food and shelter, the men spotted a farm owned by Matthias Langer, who offered the Soldiers part of his family's meager rations.

At dawn, after receiving a tip, a group of Nazi SS stopped in front of the Langer house. Surrendering, the Soldiers were forced to sit in the cold and mud while their fate was decided. Marched to a cow pasture behind the house, they were tortured and later shot or bayoneted to death.

In the morning, villagers saw the bodies of the men in a ditch. Since they were afraid that the Germans might return, they didn't touch the dead Americans. The bodies remained covered by snowfall until mid-February 1945 when villagers directed a U.S. Army Grave Registration unit to the scene.

Unlike similar war crimes, the slaying of these men wasn't as well documented or prosecuted. After an investigation proved fruitless, and not turning up any positive identification of those whom committed the murders, the investigation was closed.

As a private gesture from the Langer family, a son, Herman, erected a small cross, with the names of the slain Soldiers, in the corner of the pasture – and for more than 60 years has maintained a vigil.

But the memorial and the town of Wereth remained basically obscure. The site was not listed in any guides or maps to the Battle of the Bulge battlefield. Even people searching for it had trouble finding it in the small community.

However, in 2001, three Belgians, including Adda Rikken, president of the U.S. Wereth Memorial committee, began raising funds to create a more fitting memorial to the Americans.

“We knew that we wanted to create a much nicer memorial for these Soldiers, but at that time our organization was very small and didn’t have much money,” Rikken said. “It took some time, but we eventually raised enough money to purchase more of the land that surrounded the original monument. Now we have a nice dedication to those heroic men.”

The dedication of the updated memorial was held May 23, 2004. Besides monuments placed by Wereth citizens, there is a plaque from the Delaware Chapter of the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge, honoring the 11 Soldiers.

And now there are road signs marking the memorial, and the Belgium Tourist Bureau notes it in its Battle of the Bulge brochures.

The Soldiers in attendance of this year’s ceremony were primarily members of The ROCKS, Inc. European Officers Chapter, a non-profit organization comprised of U.S. active-duty, reserve, retired and former commissioned officers. The organization formed in December 1974 to provide professional and social interaction to strengthen the officer corps.

In 2001, U.S. Army Garrison Benelux, Chièvres, Belgium, adopted the graves of seven men from the Wereth 11 who rest in Belgium’s Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery. Adoption certificates for the graves of Staff Sgt. Thomas Forte, Spc. James Stewart, Pfc. George Davis, Pfc. George Moten, Pfc. Due Turner, Pvt. Curtis Adam and Pvt. Nathaniel Moss – along with a history of the Wereth 11 – are located in garrison headquarters on Caserne Daumerie.

The remains of the other four soldiers, Cpl. Mager Bradley, Spc. William Pritchett, Pfc. James Leatherwood and Pvt. Robert Green, were returned to family.

“These brave Soldiers...did not have an opportunity to see the world that they aimed to create,” Via said. “Yet, because of their actions, we enjoy the world they envisioned, the world they fought for. These men were brothers, sons and fathers. They served, because like us, they believed in the values we hold dear – freedom, justice, liberty. They believed in the greater good. For this, we are thankful for their service.”

Via added his thanks to the people of Wereth, especially Rikken and Langer, for keeping the memory of the Soldiers alive after all these years.

CUTLINES

GUARD

(From left) Sgt. Edward Murray, Spc. Clint McKinley, Spc. Terrence Hicks and Pfc. Kevin McPherson, assigned to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Germany, served as the color guard for an April 28, 2007, ceremony in Wereth, Belgium. The ceremony commemorated 11 black Soldiers assigned to the 333rd Field Artillery Battalion during World War II, who were killed by the German SS on Dec. 17, 1944, during the early stages of the Battle of the Bulge. (Photo by Steve Hoover)

VIA

Brig. Gen. Dennis L. Via, 5th Signal Command’s commanding general and keynote speaker for the Wereth 11 ceremony April 28, 2007, delivers his remarks to a gathering of about 150 local townspeople, Soldiers and family members from both Belgium and Germany. (Photo by Steve Hoover)

MONUMENTS

Flowers adorn one of three monuments at the Wereth 11 Memorial dedicated to black Soldiers who were killed by the German SS during the early stages of the Battle of the Bulge. (Photo by Steve Hoover)

The U.S. Army Installation Management Command, Europe Region (IMCOM-Europe) is one of six regional offices created Oct. 24, 2006, (formerly known as Installation Management Agency) as part of an Army-wide initiative to focus management of Army installations around the world under one organization. IMCOM-Europe is responsible for all facets of support for U.S. Army Soldiers and families in Europe from drivers' licenses to child care to force protection. As the landlord for all U.S. Army facilities in Europe, IMCOM-Europe is responsible for infrastructure and continuing the Army's strong commitment to environmental protection. Its higher headquarters is located in Arlington, Va.